Treason to Us

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Treason to Us

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Summary

Arthur finds out Merlin's secret - and he does not react well.

Arthur snatched his sword up from the ground, rolled back onto his feet and lunged forward quickly to bring the point to Merlin's chest and keep him away. "Stay where you are," he said and Merlin stopped, his eyes going wide in panic.

Notes

Response to the merlin_flashfic Secrets Challenge. Beta by the ever-excellent torakowalski.

Arthur snatched his sword up from the ground, rolled back onto his feet and lunged forward quickly to bring the point to Merlin's chest and keep him away. "Stay where you are," he said and Merlin stopped, his eyes going wide in panic.

"I –" he started and Arthur stepped in and backhanded him in the face, knocking him down and keeping him there on his knees with the sword when Merlin tried to stand back up.

Arthur kept his eyes on Merlin's hands and his mouth, waiting for any sign that he was going to act, but he could still see the bodies scattered all around the glade in his peripheral vision. Only half of the bandits' deaths were to his account.

He'd been on the ground when the man who'd disarmed and knocked him down had suddenly clutched at his own throat and choked, dying at Arthur's feet and Arthur had seen it: Merlin standing with his hand out, his eyes gone golden and their attackers collapsing all around.

Merlin was a sorcerer.

"Who are you?" Arthur said, forcing the words out through his anger.

"I'm, I'm Merlin, you know that," Merlin said quickly and flinched when Arthur glared savagely.

"What do you want? Why are you here?"

Merlin swallowed. "I'm your servant. You told me to come hunting with you?" he said uncertainly with a pleading look, and Arthur clenched his fist around the sword hilt.

"Was that the plan? Play my servant and then destroy me?"

"What? No," Merlin protested.

"You're a liar," Arthur shouted, "and I'm not a fool. Why would a sorcerer be a servant if it wasn't for a plot?"

"To protect you! There's no plot, I swear it. I was just trying to keep you safe," Merlin said, half yelling to start with but his voice going soft and earnest at the end.

"And when you crawled into my bed?" Arthur bit out, feeling freezing anger all through his body. "Was that to keep me safe? Was that even my *choice*?"

Merlin went white, a stricken look in his eyes. "Arthur, no. I would never magic you into that, please, you have to believe me, please…"

"How can I trust someone who has lied to me for so long?" Arthur said in his iciest tone and Merlin's babble stopped abruptly as Arthur shifted his sword so the point was grazing Merlin's throat. Merlin stared up at him with despairing eyes and Arthur stared back coldly until Merlin sighed and closed his eyes.

Camelot punished magic with death. Everyone knew that.

"I'm sorry," Merlin whispered.

Arthur gritted his teeth and drew his sword back. He was waiting for Merlin to throw him back with magic, or vanish, or choke him like the others even as he swung the blade back down.

But nothing happened.

Merlin just knelt there, breathing quick and shallow in fear, his eyes still closed. And Arthur stopped the swing mid-arc, his muscles trembling with the effort. He saw a line of blood along the blade from the shallow cut he'd made at the side of Merlin's neck and he jerked the sword away with a snarl, his hands shaking.

He couldn't do it. Even for this betrayal, Arthur couldn't do it.

Arthur stepped back and watched as Merlin's eyes flew open again in shock, his hand coming up to feel the cut.

"Get up and walk," Arthur commanded and Merlin stared at him blankly. "I said walk," Arthur shouted and Merlin stumbled to his feet. He flinched away as Arthur gestured him in front with the sword, and started back towards the castle.

Arthur followed behind, weapon at the ready, in a mood so black that he was surprised that the sun was still shining above them. He could feel the cuts and bruises from the fight as he walked and it made him wish the bandits were still alive so he could kill them again. Everything was ruined.

Merlin was even clumsier than he usually was, tripping and catching himself almost constantly. Once he fell and Arthur could see his face was streaked with tears, a bruise darkening the right side from Arthur hitting him. Arthur's jaw clenched so hard that his own face ached.

Arthur cleaned and sheathed his sword as they reached Camelot, not wanting to cause alarm or questions. He paused for a moment in the courtyard, his mind empty of any plan. He caught Merlin looking at him sideways and he made a decision and marched them both off to the corridor near Gaius' rooms, stopping again near the bottom of the stairs.

"You are dismissed from my service," he said, looking at the wall. "Stay out of my sight if you want to live."

He heard Merlin's breath catch. "Arthur, please," he said and Arthur slammed him back into the wall, one hand at his throat.

"Don't ever speak my name again," he threatened, his voice low, and Merlin actually had the gall to look hurt before he dropped his eyes and nodded. Arthur stayed there frozen, close enough to kiss, close enough to kill; and then he released Merlin and stalked away.

He had to get out, had to clear his head and find some control.

Arthur destroyed three practice butts in the training field, scared off all the other knights who had been using it, and stayed out there until after the sun set before he felt calm enough to go back inside.

He still wasn't any clearer what to do. Whether it was a spell preventing him or not, he knew he couldn't kill Merlin. But if Merlin was a threat to Camelot like all the other sorcerers had been…

Arthur couldn't think. He was too angry and sore and he needed to sleep. He didn't think Merlin would attack anyone that night and he would surely leave Camelot, tomorrow if not tonight. Merlin was an idiot, but not stupid enough to stay when Arthur knew his secret and then Arthur wouldn't have to decide anything.

The thought didn't make him feel any better.

The candles weren't lit in his room and it was dark and empty, but that was fine. Arthur was quite capable of lighting candles from the torch in the corridor outside. He didn't need a servant for that.

He sank exhausted into a chair afterwards and sat for several minutes just looking at nothing but then he stirred himself and cleaned off his sword properly and started to sharpen the blade. The noise was as soothing as normal, though of course Arthur would normally just be watching while Mer… he fumbled the stone and set it and his sword on the table.

He was too tired for this.

Arthur shrugged out of his tunic, cleaned up his scrapes with the ointment Gaius was always giving him and carried a candle through into his bedroom.

His bed was made, the covers pulled up, but all Arthur could see was yesterday morning, pillows and covers thrown in disarray as Merlin arched back in the sunlight and moaned Arthur's name.

It had felt so right. So perfect.

And none of it had been real. It meant nothing.

Arthur didn't sleep that night.

~

He spent most of the next few days on the training field, only eating with his father and Morgana when he had no other choice and doing his best to avoid everyone.

By the end of the fourth day, his knights were scrambling frantically to avoid sparring with him and Arthur had damaged three of them enough for Gaius to forbid them any more training for a fortnight. Arthur would have to get them drunk or something to apologise, though not until he was sure he wouldn't kill someone if he got drunk as well.

Gaius had hesitated after he had informed Arthur of his decision, but when Arthur had narrowed his eyes at him and asked if he had something to say he had shaken his head and given Arthur a cool look before leaving.

Arthur assumed it had been something to do with Merlin, but he didn't care and he didn't want to hear it.

He'd thought for a few days that Merlin had been smart and left, but then he'd seen a flash of red shirt and blue scarf at the edge of the courtyard. Arthur saw him again and again over the rest of the week: glimpses in corridors, silhouetted in a window, from above as Merlin crossed the courtyard, his shoulders pulled in and his head down.

He was most likely working for Gaius again, but Arthur didn't ask.

Arthur had the castle seneschal organise the cleaning of his rooms

after the first two days and the head armourer was now looking after his weapons and armour. The seneschal had asked what happened to Merlin, but had frozen at Arthur's glare and promised everything would be taken care of.

All Arthur wanted was for whoever did it to do their job and not bother him. He was in no mood for dealing with servants personally.

After a week, Arthur's knights stopped looking so scared of him and the servants assigned to him left him alone aside from bowing respectfully, something Arthur had nearly forgotten servants did. Arthur should probably feel better, but he still wasn't sleeping well and every time he saw Merlin about the castle he felt like he had the time his horse had kicked him in the chest and he wanted to break something.

Arthur was forcing down some of his slab of venison at another cheerful meal with his father and Morgana when his father finally finished his hunting tale and turned to him.

"What's happened to that idiot servant of yours, Arthur? I haven't seen him around lately."

"He hasn't been working for me this week," Arthur said shortly and looked down at his goblet as Morgana frowned at him in confusion.

"Oh? Have you fired another manservant?" Uther asked.

"You sound like you would disapprove," Arthur replied, avoiding the question. Typical of his father to start paying attention just when Arthur didn't want it.

"He has shown you rare loyalty," Uther said, studying Arthur. "And you have returned it. Or has he done something to change your opinion?" he asked, his eyes going sharp.

This was it, the moment. Arthur could tell his father and Merlin would be gone (*dead*) and Arthur wouldn't be left feeling his gut churn whenever he saw Merlin, or thought about him, or was reminded of what he'd thought they had.

A heartbeat's thought, while Arthur sipped his wine slowly, trying not to grip the goblet too tightly. "He has been ill," he lied, meeting his father's eyes. "He will be back at work soon, I expect."

Uther nodded and started talking about how a king of Shetland had

been killed by a servant, and Arthur nodded in the right places and stared at his plate. It would have been so easy to give Merlin up. He'd broken the law, he'd deceived Arthur, deceived everyone.

But he'd also saved Arthur's life, more than once. No matter the reason for it, that was still true and Arthur could not repay those acts with death.

Morgana frowned at Arthur during the whole rest of the meal and afterwards she caught him in the corridor, despite how fast Arthur had walked away.

"What's going on with Merlin?" she asked, her voice concerned.

"Why would anything be going on?" he said as expressionlessly as he knew how and Morgana glared.

"He's not ill. He's delivered things from Gaius to me all this week. What have you done?"

"Why do you think I've done anything?" Arthur snapped, glaring.

"Because he looks terrible and he never smiles," Morgana snapped back. "Gwen thinks he's had his heart broken, but if it is just you being horrible to him, then you should apologise," she said angrily and Arthur had to cross his arms and hold onto his tunic to keep from shaking her until she shut up.

"It is none. Of. Your. Business," he said leaning forward and Morgana actually backed up a step. "Go ask your precious Merlin if you're so concerned."

He spun around and left before he really lost his temper. How dare Morgana take Merlin's side like that? Arthur was not the one in the wrong here. And damn his father for backing Arthur into a corner. He didn't ever want to see Merlin again and now he was stuck with him until his father's attention turned elsewhere.

Amazingly enough, Arthur didn't sleep well that night either.

~

The next afternoon found Arthur at Gaius door. He'd intended to do it in the morning, get it over with, but somehow other things had come up all morning until Arthur really had run out of things to do. He squared his shoulders and knocked.

"Your Highness," Gaius said in a surprised tone as he answered it. "Not broken any more knights, I hope," he added drily and Arthur shook his head.

"No. Is Merlin here?" he said having to force the name out and feeling slightly sick. This was ridiculous; it was Merlin who should be feeling like this, not Arthur.

Gaius gave him a shrewd look before stepping away from the door and Arthur swallowed hard. "Merlin?" Gaius called.

Arthur heard footsteps from above and then Merlin came down from his room, a bowl in his hands. He stopped like he'd hit a wall when he saw Arthur, the bowl dropping and shattering on the floor and spreading water in a puddle.

"Arth- *Sire*," Merlin said, sounding shaky and looking a mixture of hopeful and terrified. Arthur had to look away at the table full of Gaius' usual clutter.

"You're to resume your duties as my servant," he told a bundle of herbs and heard a quick indrawn breath.

"When?" Merlin said, sounding so eager, and Arthur couldn't take this.

"Tomorrow," he said, still talking to the herbs, caught one glance of Merlin standing as tense as a bowstring as he turned to leave, and then he fled.

~

Arthur spent the rest of the day trying to decide whether it would be worse to watch Merlin at work in his rooms or to leave and wonder what Merlin was doing. He changed his mind about twenty times and ended up making a mess of his room in between, so Merlin would at least have plenty to do.

Morning found Arthur up and breakfasted almost before dawn, leaving him plenty of time to pace and be indecisive until there was finally a knock on the door.

"Come in," Arthur said firmly, throwing himself down into a chair and pretending to read a book. He surreptitiously watched a nervous-looking Merlin enter and look around as he closed the door.

"Sire, I –" he began and Arthur looked up.

"Did I ask you speak?" he interrupted. Before Merlin would have ignored him and carried on, but now he closed his mouth with a wince and shook his head. "Then don't," Arthur said, returning to his book though he had absolutely no idea what was on the page.

Merlin stood there for another second and Arthur could see his hands clench before he turned away and started working. He tidied up the dishes from Arthur's breakfast and stacked them by the door. Cleaned the table. Swept the floor everywhere except for a wide circle around where Arthur was. Removed the candle ends and replaced them with new candles, checked the level of firewood and brought in more, did all the things Arthur had seen him do a hundred times before. Only before, Merlin would have chattered away and Arthur would have mocked and been teased in return, or they would have argued about something and then laughed about it.

Now they were both silent and by the time Merlin had gone into the bedroom to make the bed and grab Arthur's dirty clothes for laundry and come back out, Arthur could feel the tension as an ache all across his shoulders and up his neck.

If Arthur didn't relax, he would end up with a headache that lasted hours. Merlin used to rub the tension out, his strong hands soothing all the aches away… Arthur heard Merlin's steps falter and snatched his hand away from the back of his neck. He raised his eyes to find Merlin watching him with a sad look, but Merlin just turned away and started carefully folding Arthur's cloak. It took him a while.

After that was finished, Merlin simply hovered, not doing anything, and after a minute Arthur gave in and asked. "What?"

"I… your armour isn't here?" he asked and Arthur shook his head. He used to take it off in his room and let Merlin sort and clean it and return it to the armoury.

"That is no longer part of your duties," he said finally, looking up. Arthur might have to put up with Merlin cleaning again, but in a battle, that armour could be all that stood between Arthur and death, and he wasn't prepared to give that responsibility to anyone he didn't trust.

"Oh," Merlin said very quietly and Arthur could tell he got it from the way he bit his lip and looked at the floor very hard, and the flash of dismay and resignation in his eyes before he looked down.

Merlin has always been like that, every emotion showing in his eyes.

It was one of the reasons Arthur had trusted him so quickly, because how could someone so transparent hide anything important?

Apparently Arthur had been wrong about that. Merlin had no trouble concealing the truth at all.

He shoved out of his seat, the book falling to the floor, and left, suddenly unable to bear being in the same room as Merlin any longer.

~

After that, Arthur avoided being present when Merlin was around as much as he could, leaving his rooms before Merlin arrived and not returning until after dark. It wasn't like it was difficult to do; Camelot was a large castle and there were many quiet corners to tuck himself away in when Arthur had no princely duties to fulfil.

But eventually he would return and find everything perfect: candles lit, fire too if it was cold, everything cleaner and neater than Merlin had ever managed before. It felt like every fresh piece of clothing or sheets, every beautifully plumped-up pillow and folded blanket was an entreaty, a plea for forgiveness.

It made it hard to relax, even alone, because he wasn't really alone; Merlin was everywhere in the room.

And that was another thing. Arthur was lonely.

It was nearly two weeks since Arthur had taken Merlin back as his servant, but Morgana still wasn't talking to him. Not that this was a particularly new phenomenon, but it had never gone on this long before and her servant Gwen kept glaring at him in the corridors as well, until she remembered herself and dropped her eyes.

With Morgana a dead-end, that left Arthur with his father or his knights for companionship. Arthur loved and respected his father, but he wasn't exactly relaxing company when nearly everything he said could turn out to be a test of Arthur's fitness to rule.

And the knights… Arthur liked some of them, and they could have fun and joke around. But there was always a barrier there because he was the prince. Arthur had never really noticed it; he'd thought that was just how friendships were. And then Merlin had arrived with his complete obliviousness to any barriers of rank or propriety, and now Arthur knew what the difference was and couldn't go back

Arthur had always been lonely. He'd just never known it before, and he blamed Merlin for that.

He also blamed Merlin for the fact that the head armourer's best efforts no longer met his standards. He knew Merlin couldn't have used magic to tend his things all the time because Arthur had watched Merlin polishing and mending them sometimes. But there was something different about his armour now, he could feel it. The armourer was good, but things still wore and tarnished and he never got the fit of it quite as good on Arthur as Merlin had.

Maybe that was magic, but Arthur had a sneaking suspicion that Merlin just cared about it a lot more.

It took another three days to decide he was going to do it, but one day instead of going to the armoury to leave his weapons and mail shirt after training, Arthur wore them back to his room and picked up some other bits for good measure.

He struggled out of everything himself (it could be done, it was just a lot easier with help) and dumped the whole lot on the table just like he used to.

Arthur was sitting on the window ledge reading when Merlin arrived but he still saw the disbelieving look Merlin gave his armour. "Merlin. Clean that lot, would you," Arthur drawled as casually as he can manage, but he couldn't help looking up as he said it and so he saw the smile on Merlin's face. It was the first time he'd seen Merlin smile since the forest, and he had to look away from the brightness, from the way Merlin's eyes were all lit up because otherwise Arthur couldn't quite seem to breathe properly.

"Yes, sire. Thank you, sire," Merlin said breathlessly, apparently having the same problem, and he scooped everything up and vanished back out of the door, clutching it to his chest.

Arthur still wasn't sure where he stood with Merlin, but he felt better than he had for weeks so he tried not to think about it too much.

~

Things were a little easier after that. Arthur sometimes stayed in his rooms when Merlin was there, and Merlin started talking again. Just hesitant comments at first, but when Arthur didn't stop him, he talked for longer and longer. Arthur was suddenly much better informed of castle gossip again, and if it felt like Merlin was occasionally trying

too hard to be light and casual, Arthur wasn't going to complain. It was better than the lonely silence.

And then a shepherd was caught driving a wolf off using magic and Uther sentenced him to death.

On the day of the execution, Merlin was completely silent at his duties again. He also looked like it was only willpower keeping him moving without shattering at every step.

Arthur found he didn't like seeing that. "Merlin," he said and Merlin stopped sweeping, gripping the broom tightly. "Stop. Go pick herbs for Gaius or do something else out of town."

Merlin let out a jerky sigh and nodded stiffly. "Are you going to watch?" he asked quietly, staring at the broom, and Arthur turned away abruptly to look out of the window.

"My father commands it," he said shortly. It didn't mean Merlin had to though. "Look, just go," he added and after a minute he heard Merlin walk out and close the door.

It wasn't the first execution Arthur had attended by a long shot, but he'd never got used to it. Death in battle was clean and familiar. A cold-blooded killing by a headsman was a long way from that and even when Arthur agreed with the necessity he found it hard to watch.

He hated this one more than most though. The shepherd was skinny and dark-haired and it was all too easy for Arthur to picture Merlin on the block instead, terrified and despairing. When the axe fell, Arthur had to look away or disgrace himself by throwing up and it took all the control he had ever learned to nod respectfully to his father's lecture afterwards on the evils of magic and walk away when he had finished like it was any other day.

Maybe Arthur had been too quick to blame Merlin for keeping his magic secret from him. If there was something that could get Arthur killed so easily, he wouldn't exactly be rushing to share it either, no matter how much he trusted someone.

If Arthur could just be sure that everything else with Merlin had been true, know that his trust hadn't been misplaced then maybe he wouldn't feel so hollow all the time. He brooded over it all that night, but got no closer to an answer.

Merlin was subdued when he resurfaced the next day and he watched

Arthur sidelong all the time he worked. Arthur knew because he watched Merlin back, cataloguing everything he saw and everything he knew from watching all these months.

So who was Merlin? Tall, skinny and with sticking-out ears that he got embarrassed about when Arthur teased him. He was curious and enthusiastic about silly things and (usually) cheerful. He got into trouble constantly, but mostly from trying to help someone and not thinking it through. Merlin was reckless, and brave and sarcastic and not intimidated by anyone. He was infuriating and stubborn and fun. He made Arthur get angry, and laugh and think more than anyone else did. He made Arthur *want* more than anyone else did too.

Merlin was, *had been*, Arthur's friend and his lover.

Merlin had saved his life. Merlin had magic.

Arthur had a headache.

~

A few days later Arthur leant against his table and watched Merlin sharpen his sword and various knives. Merlin had made some comment about making them as sharp as Morgana's tongue and Arthur had fired back that he should at least see they were sharper than his wits. They'd both grinned but Arthur's grin had faltered and Merlin had dropped his eyes and concentrated on the blades again, and Arthur was tired of this.

"How can I ever know if I trust you because it's right, or because of a spell?" he asked abruptly and Merlin looked up.

"I… don't know," he said slowly, frowning. "I suppose you can't." Arthur frowned as well and dropped into a seat. That wasn't exactly reassuring, though he would concede it was honest. "But if I were controlling you, I wouldn't have spent the last month wondering every day if it would be the day your father's guards came for me," Merlin added, an edge to his voice, and Arthur winced.

"I didn't tell him and I won't," he said firmly.

"I didn't know that," Merlin said quietly, holding Arthur's eyes steadily and Arthur was the first to look away.

"Why did you stay?" he asked, turning back, and it was Merlin's turn to be uncomfortable, looking down with a shrug and fiddling with a

knife hilt. "Merlin."

Merlin lifted his head when Arthur said his name. "I stayed for you," he said, almost defiantly and Arthur swallowed hard, everything tangling into a lump in this throat so he couldn't even think what his response should be. "I won't ever leave willingly," Merlin went on in a desperately casual voice, "and if someone tries to make me, they'd better bring an army."

"So," Arthur finally managed, "you're saying I'm stuck with you following me about and saving my life willy-nilly whether I like it or not?"

"Essentially," Merlin said, still apparently trying for nonchalance but missing by a mile. He looked so hopeful and imploring that Arthur's heart pounded and his hands shook.

Trust was a leap of faith. And Arthur had practice at leaping off cliffs for Merlin.

He stood up, leaned in and cupped Merlin's face in his hands. He stared into Merlin's eyes for a moment, seeing nothing but sincere, steadfast blue, and then he kissed him.

It felt like the first time they'd kissed, it felt perfect, and Merlin stretched up into it, finally standing and clutching at Arthur's arms. When they finally stopped to breathe, Merlin buried his head in Arthur's shoulder, trembling, and Arthur whispered his apologies against the thin little scar on his throat.

This was right, and it was real. And that was the only truth that mattered.

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